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A

BRIEF REVIEW

OF

DR. HORNER'S

"NECROLOGICAL NOTICE"

OF

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Washington.

PHILIP SYNG PHYSICK, M. D.



PHILADELPHIA:

1838.

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The reader will discover some errors in the arrangement of sentences and words, which the author has permitted to pass without correction, to save the time which would have been required to remodel the pamphlet after the first impression.

It is to be regretted that the learned author of the notice of Dr. Physick did not furnish us with the meaning of the expression "Necrological Notice;" for although, when addressed by a Professor to a congregation of Philosophers, it might be perfectly understood and be in good taste, yet when used as a title to a publication which is obviously intended for the perusal of all, whether learned or unlearned, it is, to say the least, out of place.

In the opening of this "Necrological Notice," we are informed that great men and great mountains should be seen from a *distance* in order to appreciate their *exact* magnitude. Now, overlooking the happy similitude of a great man to a great mountain, we must aver that, although *distance* may "lend enchantment to the view," it is very unfavourable to accurate or *exact* measurement; at least so it seems to those who are neither philosophers nor professors. But perhaps it was the intention of the author of the Notice to intimate that, when we are near a great man, we observe many little peculiarities or obliquities which

diminish the interest we are disposed to feel in him, and which do not strike us when we behold him at a distance. And what was the object proposed by this intimation? To prepare us for the exhibition of some traits, peculiarities or faults, in the character of the lamented Physick, which were unknown to the world when that great man lived, but which had not escaped the penetration of the biographer, whose situation, *he supposed*, gave him opportunities which others had not? Such, indeed, seems to have been the object; for the biographer, not satisfied with the gentle intimation thrown out, proceeds to explain himself fully, by maintaining that none would be pleased with the historian who, from a mistaken tenderness to the memory of Cæsar, should suppress the narrative of his dissoluteness and prodigality! Our attention is then directed to the transgressions of David, Solomon, and Moses; and we are told that even the inspired volume recorded the errors of its great men. Finally, as if intending to prepare us for a history of the faults of the great man who is the subject of the memoir, “with this preamble I may now proceed to state,” commences the narrative of Dr. Physick’s life! We are told distinctly that the circumstances and relations to which we have adverted form the *preamble*, and well do the pages following sustain the opening promise. There seems to have been a determination not to present the brightest side of a character which had always been sustained through the severest ordeal—that of the life of its possessor—and which, we suppose, formed the particular inducement to the Philosophical Society when they requested a Professor to prepare the notice

which has been presented to the public in a "Necrological" form.

Credit should be awarded to the biographer for the care with which he has preserved some historical facts, which, though their connexion with Dr. Physick cannot be traced, are doubtless important, and might have been entirely lost to the world, had they not been presented to the Philosophical Society; to wit:—Mr. Physick, the father of the lamented surgeon, at the request of Governor Penn, took possession of the Lansdown estate; *and it was in the winter of this period that Mr. Physick, on visiting Valley Forge, observed that the cannons of the American army were frozen immovably in the mud!*

We are left in much doubt, by the contradictory statements of circumstances, upon the subject of Dr. Physick's tastes in early life. First we are informed that the leaning of his mind was to the business of a shoemaker, and that he made a pair of shoes; then he doubts between the employment of a shoemaker and that of a silversmith, until the *compulsion* of his father makes him a surgeon. Still it seems that his disposition to become a silversmith lingered about him even to the hour of his death; and his latest and most poignant regret was that he had not been a silversmith. We are informed that the severest sorrow with which one of the most distinguished and greatest men of the nineteenth century was afflicted, was that he had not been a silversmith. But it will be permitted to others, who think that they also had opportunities of learning the tastes and feelings of our departed surgeon, to take a very different view. It is believed that, what-

ever his various and unfixed predilections (such as those which generally accompany boyhood) for particular branches of mechanical arts may have been, there was a decided tendency of mind to scientific pursuits, which was wisely regulated and directed by his father to the profession for which nature herself seems to have designed him; and as to the regret which he expressed in late years, we affirm with confidence that it was entirely misunderstood by his biographer. With that modesty of character which is legitimate to great minds, he might have supposed that he had not been as useful in the world as others who had served in humbler capacities, and believed himself incompetent to the great undertaking in which he had embarked; but there was in him so much of the good Samaritan, that if he did regret the adoption of the medical profession, it was not because he thought that he might have made "himself" happier by some other employment.

The biographer proceeds to inform us that when Dr. Physick was twenty years of age, his father placed him under the direction of the celebrated John Hunter, who replied to the interrogatory, 'what books will be necessary,' by pointing to some dead bodies in a dissecting room, and saying "there are the books which the student will learn under my direction; the others are fit for very little;" and Dr. Physick never forgot the remark, *especially after committing to memory Cullen's First Lines*. In the year 1792, Dr. Physick took his degree; and, as we are informed in a note by the biographer, dedicated to John Hunter an Essay, entitled "De Apoplexia," which was written in Latin; but

whether this version was written by Dr. Physick himself or not, the biographer says that he does not know! It was prudent in the Professor not to commit himself upon a point involving a question as to the ability or attainment of Philip Syng Physick. After he had taken his degree, according to the biographer, his father secured him an office, and gave him *two shillings and sixpence*, informing him that he had then *an outfit*, and must learn to take care of himself. Whether the expression *outfit* refers to the office, or to the capital of two shillings and sixpence, or to both, is not particularly stated; however, we are relieved of the apprehension created by the statement of the outfit by the subsequent relation of his having succeeded in *persuading* several families to employ him at the rate of twenty dollars a year. Now, though these particulars may be correct, it is most probable that there were many accompanying circumstances unknown to the biographer, which, if disclosed, would relieve us of the unpleasant associations suggested by such details; at all events, their introduction was unnecessary.

There is a singular employment of words throughout the "Necrological Notice" which cannot escape the observation of the most careless reader; indeed, so much so, that manifest injustice is frequently done to the subject of the notice, when we are satisfied that it cannot be intended. Upon one occasion he is represented as giving a *sardonic* smile, which can mean nothing else than that Dr. Physick was at the time insincere, and forced a smile upon his countenance which was not the faithful image of any emotion of his heart. We will here take the liberty of inquiring

with what view the painful description of Dr. Physick's body after death was introduced? "His countenance had then a superannuated, painful, haggard expression, wrapped in the dulness and mystery of death. His frame declared his recent sufferings and exhaustion; the upper parts attenuated to a mere skeleton, the lower extremities and abdomen bloated ready to burst with dropsy, and actually beginning a sphacelated softening and ulceration here and there."

Not to be too troublesome with our interrogatories, we will now ask the Professor from whom this "Necrological Notice" proceeds, why he did not reflect a little, but a little while, ere he attempted to fix a stain upon the memory of Philip Syng Physick, by charging him with obliquity of character and weakness in directing that his body should be watched after interment? If such were the sentiments of the Professor as to Dr. Physick's directions for the disposal of his body, would it not have been more modest in him to suppose that Dr. Physick *might* be right and he wrong? Would not such a supposition have better sustained his professions of regard and respect for the departed surgeon? or would it not have been wiser to pass over the matter in silence? What circumstance happening in the course of a long practice may have operated upon the mind of Dr. Physick and suggested the directions adverted to, we know not; doubtless they were such as to fully justify the expression of his wishes, and to render that expression compatible with the high sentiments which distinguished his character. This is one of the many instances afforded by the biographer throughout his notice of his entire forgetfulness of the

nature of the charge reposed in his hands. It was undoubtedly the intention of those who selected him as their orator, that he should assist in preserving for the eye of memory the portrait of a great and good man; a character for future admiration and imitation; an example or a model—not a picture enveloped with weaknesses or obliquities, apparently selected for the purpose of concealing its beauty. We say *apparently*, for we would be distinctly understood as charging the biographer simply with want of skill, discretion, or information: his good intentions we doubt not.

We are further told by the biographer that Dr. Physick was *particularly intolerant to opposition*; that he said to a lady, whose *maternal solicitude* was excited to rebel at the repeated bleedings of a child, “Madam, I take leave of your child; the responsibility of its life rests with you.” Could there possibly be a more unfortunate combination of words and expressions than is here presented? The words *maternal solicitude* at once apologize for the conduct of the mother, because they convey the idea that it was nothing more than natural in her to rebel at the repeated bleeding of the child; but the surgeon, in the hands of his biographer, is made to utter a cold and abrupt reply, without any explanatory reason. Again: Mr. Lardner was bled *frequently*, and simply made *some expression of doubt*; to which the reply was, “Sir, I must have my own way, or none at all; I bid you good day.” Still further, we suppose to cap the climax of the paragraph, “To a West Indian, who was refractory at being tapped for a hydrocele, he said, ‘Sir, I’ll have none of this; *down with your pantaloons*, I know perfectly what I am

about.' ” We are left in doubt as to whether the West Indian did *down with his pantaloons*; but the presumption is that he did, because he was “cured.” Now we all know how much occurs to annoy and harass a physician in his treatment of patients, and it is quite possible that the expressions above quoted may have been used; but all the circumstances under which they were uttered should have been given, if such were possible, or the whole relation should have been suppressed. Indeed, it seems to us that a wise biographer would not have hunted among the private relations of a sick chamber for occurrences which, when they may have happened, were as much matter of regret to the physician as to the patient, to make up a history of a great man, which was intended for the public eye. In another case cited, of a gentleman who, when under treatment for sore legs, had, by feasting and drinking, violated the prescribed rules of diet, Dr. Physick did no more than *express the strongest reprobation*. He is not in that case represented as having left the patient abruptly; a case of positive disobedience, which would go much further than any of the others named towards disturbing the patience of a physician. The practice of this eminent man was so extensive, that very many of this community have had opportunities of witnessing his conduct in the chamber of the patient. We can remember that his manner was grave, and that his tone was that of one deeply impressed with a sense of his responsibility, yet characterized by that firmness which is indispensable in the hour of difficulty and danger, and which, under all circumstances, tends to impart confidence

and hope to the patient, as much as it assists in promoting the success of the physician; but to Dr. Physick peculiarly belonged the faculty of wisely and delicately blending the *suaviter in modo* with the *fortiter in re*.

The description of the personal appearance of Dr. Physick is not more flattering than that of his character and deportment. According to the biographer, "his ear was large, *flat*, and unhandsome,"—"he was not well formed in the legs and feet, the latter being rather large and *flat*." It may not be a very important matter what was his personal appearance; still let us have correct impressions if we refer to the subject at all. All who remember Dr. Physick must remember him as a remarkably fine looking, handsome man, without descending to particulars about his legs and feet; though as to the latter, disease in the evening of his life may have affected them, and doubtless did; which should have been mentioned by the biographer, together with the statement that his legs were badly formed and his feet large and flat.

We now approach a more important topic. Dr. Physick's biographer represents him as having "strong suspicions and prejudices of the French character; he was with no small difficulty made to believe that there was anything sensible, good, or truthful in French medicine." Where is the evidence of this aversion to French character and medicine? What record or remark made by the eminent surgeon sustains the charge? In the same paragraph with the preceding, the biographer contradicts himself when he says, "Notwithstanding, however, his aversion to every thing French, he saw the value of Dessault's principles of bandaging;

and having made some useful additions, he practiced on them during the greater part of his surgical life.” He practiced on Dessault’s principles during the greater part of his surgical life, and yet held the strongest aversion to every thing that was French! Now, we declare that Dr. Physick had no *prejudice* against the French at any time; that he had at one time, and justly too, reason to find fault with a French surgeon, Dupuytren, who very unhandsomely claimed an invention, the credit of which was due to Dr. Physick; that even the difficulty growing out of this difference between him and Dupuytren was entirely removed many years since. In a letter from a physician residing in Paris, addressed to Dr. Physick, we have the following:

“While the unfavourable reports of your health have occasioned no little anxiety to your friends in this city, there is one report in which you are interested, originating here, which has proved highly gratifying to them, and which will, I trust, not prove uninteresting to you. This is the long withheld acknowledgment on the part of certain French surgeons, of the origin of the operation for artificial anus. A few days since Professor Mott, of New York, and Dr. Tucker, of our city, were invited by M. Roux to hear his lecture introductory to a clinical course in the Hotel Dieu. M. Roux is the successor of Dupuytren; and on this occasion, after alluding to the numerous improvements in surgery which have lately occurred in Europe, he stated that they were not confined to one side of the Atlantic, but that several very important ones were due to an eminent surgeon of Philadelphia, and among them one

claimed by his predecessor in the chair he then occupied; namely, the operation for artificial anus."

It is known to those who were on familiar terms with Dr. Physick, that the information conveyed in this letter afforded him much satisfaction and pleasure; but the author of the "Necrological Notice" was not one of those with whom Dr. Physick conversed upon the subject. The conduct of Dupuytren upon the subject of this invention very naturally created some feeling in the breast of Dr. Physick towards Dupuytren and his French friends, who were as disingenuous as himself; but this feeling was not extended to the French nation—neither to French medicine nor to science in France, whatever he may in some moment of mirth have said about a *French cook*. We very distinctly remember that, having occasion to visit Dr. Physick upon business important to him, though unconnected with his profession, when ushered into his parlour, we found him surrounded by French medical periodicals; and such was the degree of interest which they seemed to have excited in him, that we found it almost impossible to lead his attention from them to the object of our visit. He repeatedly took them up and read passages aloud; and certainly, as much from the ease with which he read them as from his expressions of sentiment, we received the impression that he was in the habit of reading French medical literature and enjoyed it. We maintain—and believe that all who appreciate the character of Dr. Physick will sustain us—that he had no illiberal *prejudice* against any thing *because* it was *French*.

As an instance of the peculiarity of style adopted

by the biographer upon an occasion invested with the most solemn and melancholy associations, we would notice the following words: "When we could *swallow* the preceding creed with the sincerity and simplicity of *John Bull* himself." In a *professor* writing upon the subject of the death of a great man, and addressing himself to *philosophers*, this may not be undignified or trifling; but it certainly would be deemed so in any other person. Perhaps it was intended as a severe and cutting sarcasm upon this "John Bull;" if so, it was unkind.

We now approach the notice of Dr. Physick's religious or theological views; in adverting to which the biographer has fallen into the most lamentable confusion, and has, we sincerely believe *unconsciously*, charged our departed surgeon with *infidelity* of the darkest character, and at the same time attacked religion itself. Let the biographer speak for himself:—"The doctrines of theology occupied much of his attention for twenty years or more before he died; yet it must be admitted that he *derived a very doubtful satisfaction from them*. Its* dogmatic points were always the subjects of inquietude, and were never fully received by him; difficulties great and small were constantly present to his imagination. His profession made him the witness of so much human pain and misery, *that he did not know how to reconcile it with what was said of the goodness of the Creator.*" * * * "The preceding sombre and questionable views of the benevolence of the Deity, no doubt arose from his bad state of health, excluding him from

* To what does "its" refer?

every thing like personal enjoyment, or a deliberate survey of the glories and beauties, I may say *beatitudes*, of nature; and from his mind being therefore never relieved from the achings produced by his routine of professional duty." * * * "It will now be understood how Dr. Physick's unsatisfactory prosecution of religious inquiries *was the natural and the logical result of his character*. His sensibility to suffering made it incomprehensible to him how the fiat of Omnipotence, which spoke the beasts of the earth into existence and the cattle, but also infused the most hostile and deadly passions into them, should, under such circumstances, declare "God saw that it was good." * * * "Impelled to it (the Christian faith) on one side by a sense of his helplessness; of the necessity of a support more than the world can give; by a feeling of respect for a system so universally diffused, advocated and adopted by men of the greatest virtue and intelligence. On the other side, *he was repelled from it by the invincible principles of his own mind. It was an incomprehensible code to him, and so it continued to the last*. In former years I have often heard him say, when ruminating on this subject: "Death, what can it be; with all our inquiry it is at last a fearful step in the dark." "All knowledge is emptiness itself, or a *misty vision*."

"It is no uncommon thing in the practice of medicine to find a woman, born, living, and dying in obscurity, with little or no education, but yet, directed by her religious sentiments and vows, exhibit a most edifying example of meekness and joy at the prospect of release from a painful existence; believing that she had done her part, and had nothing more to ask for.

On the contrary, the man of high powers and cultivation, emblazoned with distinctions, or *tumid* with philosophy, is found in every way the reverse." * * * "Death is to him a region of unpromising and unknown characters; the admitted revelations on this subject are to him either conjectures or fables, for his texture of mind renders it unsusceptible of the requisite faith; his belief can never reach that vivifying and enthusiastic point which enables him to say, Death where is thy sting! grave where is thy victory! *How strangely does the inside of a great man contrast with the outside*—with the part and the appendages that the world sees, and delusively believes to be the source of unfailing happiness."

We will begin our comment upon this strange and sad combination and contradiction of views and sentiments, by flatly denying that it conveys correct impressions of the lamented Physick. We subjoin the only record in existence of Dr. Physick's religious views—one written by himself, and which returned to his hands from the person to whom it was directed—was preserved by him until his death, and was never by him contradicted. It is an extract from a letter written to a relative in '98, when Dr. Physick was a physician in the "Yellow-fever Hospital," and surrounded by all those most terrible forms of disease and death which his biographer would suppose calculated to make him doubt the goodness and benevolence of his God. Dr. Physick writes: "Make yourselves easy about me; I am doing my duty; and I am at present quite easy, in the *belief and certainty* that I am in the hands of a *most merciful God*, in whom alone is all my dependence. *What support and comfort does the Chris-*

tian religion afford me!" Now it seems to us that the conduct of the biographer in attempting to represent to the world the religious opinions of a great man, whose example must have some weight, without any other data than loose expressions, escaping perhaps in moments of light conversation, when it could not have been understood that those expressions were to be formally and solemnly recorded as the evidences of settled convictions, deserves the most unqualified condemnation. At least a little inquiry might have been made to ascertain whether or not there existed any testimony to rebut the unfavourable and rashly formed presumptions of the biographer. Such inquiry would have resulted in the production of the conclusive proof above quoted by us, and of another important fact, to wit: that some time before Dr. Physick died, he was asked by a relative, "Have you faith in the Christian religion?" to which he replied, with great emphasis, "Yes! indeed I have."

It will be observed that the biographer maintains that Dr. Physick doubted the benevolence of God, *because there was suffering in the world*; that he did not, could not believe Divine Revelation, *because the truths of Christianity were not demonstrated or even not obvious to the senses*; and he was repelled from them by the *invincible principles of his own mind*; and upon his own account the biographer asserts that the man of high powers and cultivation never exhibits an edifying example of meekness and joy at the prospect of release from a painful existence! We have no authority offered for any of these conclusions, which seems to have been sanctioned by Dr. Physick, with the exception of a remark once made by him, that "Death was

a fearful step in the dark." What the Doctor intended to intimate by this, we know not, nor could his biographer know; it is susceptible of many constructions, all of which may be consistent with Christian belief. The biographer has assumed the responsibility of the public declaration, that one of the most eminent men of the nineteenth century—a man whose fame had reached the old world and was treasured there, whose opinions in his profession were as laws or principles—a man who, at home or abroad, was admired and respected—was an Infidel! And upon what authority? Idle rumour! He should have paused and reflected long, very long, before he threw into the scale of infidelity the weight of such an example; for, if what he has advanced be true, he has done more to assist the enemies to religion throughout the world, than all the open attacks of a Paine or a Hume could have done, and has sustained one of their most fearful and dangerous assumptions. Had it been true, the cause of religion required of one of its professors silence; indeed, tremendous was the responsibility assumed by the biographer when he presumed to face the contingency of its being true or false. That the whole charge is unfounded, we trust that we have established by the testimony of the lamented surgeon himself—by the production of the only record in existence of his religious views; and we point to his life for the manifestation of Christian faith in the practice of the virtues it inculcates.

We do know that, during the last year of Dr. Physick's life, an eminent divine* of the Episcopal church

* Rev. William H. De Lancey, D. D.

was, at *his request*, constantly at his bed-side, pouring into his heart the consolations of the Christian religion; that they were gratefully received, the anxiety with which they were repeatedly solicited sufficiently establishes; though the sincere and glowing eloquence which doubtless was mingled with them may have increased the assurance that the waters which the dying man was imbibing had their fountain in Heaven.

The biographer becomes less dangerous to the memory of Dr. Physick, though more so to himself, when he becomes so wrapt in confusion that, in spite of his own religious principles, he maintains that the man of high powers seldom or never exhibits an edifying example of meekness and Christian submission!—that the man of mind can never look upon death with composure!—that the *inside* of a *great* man is very different from his *outside*! However, that part of the notice which treats of religion we will dismiss; it defies criticism—it is *brilliantly incomprehensible*.

The conclusion of this singular notice relates that “Some of the incidents of the doctor’s last sickness, marking the *decrepitude* into which he had fallen, transpired, so as to become the subjects of *public conversation*; for to him *was not granted* the boon so eloquently expressed in the message of the Senate to the President of the United States on the death of General Washington, that, ‘Favoured of Heaven, he departed without exhibiting the weakness of humanity.’ ” * * * “That Philadelphia feels *impatient* and *excited* when she hears that her great men have undergone the lot of *declining humanity*; that the pains, the *capriciousness*, the *imbecilities of mind* and body of old age, have also come upon

them." * * * * That "Philadelphia requires that the ermine of reputation be neither *stained*, *torn* NOR ABUSED in any way; that the *character itself* should correspond with the *hypothetical perfection and greatness* which are PRESUMED to attend it; and she denies to age its great privilege of returning once more to *childhood*." This is the concluding lamentation of the biographer in his own behalf and in that of the city of Philadelphia over the departed Physick.

Before taking our leave of the subject, we desire it to be understood that we have no disrespectful feeling towards the author whose "Notice" we have reviewed; that if any opinion or expression has escaped in this hastily written production which has any tendency to impugn the motives of that author, or to question the sincerity of his regard for the lamented surgeon, we regret it extremely, and solemnly declare that such was not intended. Our business has been with the "Notice," and not with the author; *he* might have complained, and justly too, if we had said to him, "Sir, be prepared for a bad character. You have some virtues, we believe; but they are so clogged by weaknesses and faults that their force is lost. You published an essay in Latin, which looks something like a pretension to literature, but then we do not believe that you wrote it. You can never have enlarged views of professional subjects, because you are bitterly prejudiced against a nation (France) the most distinguished in the world of science, and you will take no hint from her. You are very irritable, and intolerant of opposition; even the legitimate exhibition of maternal solicitude will cause an outbreking of your temper. The fact is, that your personal appearance is much

against you; to be honest with you, try as you may to hide your ears with your hair, we all know that they are large, flat and unhandsome; your legs are badly formed; indeed, nature seems to have determined that you should have no symmetry; for the other extremity of your person, your feet, are, like your ears, large and flat. Further, for we must be candid with you, it is the natural and logical deduction from your character that the sublime truths of Christianity must be lost upon you; into a miserable condition of imbecility and decrepitude you will fall, and you cannot die ‘favoured of Heaven.’” Whilst we deny that we have said any thing like this to the author, we ask him, do you recognise the portrait?

We cannot be charged with an “odious comparison” when we say that, in perusing the *Necrological Notice of Dr. Physick*, we did dwell with sincere and deep regret upon the absence of a pen which has contributed some of the most brilliant pages to the annals of literature in this country—which has exhibited the principles and truths of medical science with taste and genius—a pen, guided by one whose character is the combination of many beauties of mind and heart, now occupying a chair in the same hall which was once adorned by a Physick—one who enjoyed the confidence of that lamented surgeon always and everywhere—whether in the profession or in the most private relations of life—Nathaniel Chapman.

The man who is endowed with powers beyond those ordinarily allowed to his race, frequently labours under the misfortune of being misunderstood and misjudged. It is the hand of kindred genius that best can trace through all the workings of such a mind, their finely

woven relations, and exhibit the consistency of the whole with sound and philosophical views. Dr. Phisick needs no defender; his friends ask for him only justice; he still lives vividly and freshly in the minds of us all; and long, very long, will he be as a household memory in most of the families of this community, cherished amid associations and recollections of friends relieved of the pangs of disease or saved from the hand of death. Without fortune or friends he entered upon the career of his profession—in its close he was blessed with both. He had no friend near the throne of that most eccentric and fickle of all monarchs—public opinion; he determined to earn his place among the distinguished of the land, and successfully were his energies devoted. Silently and unostentatiously he worked his way through the paths of his profession—then almost untrodden in this country—never yielding to the prejudices of any hour, nor courting the assistance of popular clamour. The corner stone of his fame was laid early in life—when the fever of '98 threatened the country with desolation. He continued through a long practice to prove that the name then originated was not the offspring of a happy combination of circumstances yielding him opportunities which, if presented to any other under similar relations, might have produced the same results. In the college, the sick chamber, the hospital and the prison, by day and by night, almost without res through the whole of his professional life he was at work, bringing from each and all the materials for an enduring fame, until it was built up like the temple of Solomon, “where neither the sound of the axe nor the hammer was heard.”

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